

Two Ends of a Rainbow

Australia – Syria

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Occasional Paper 2 in the Rainbow Theology Series

Published by
Wontulp-Bi-Buya College
PO Box 960N, NORTH CAIRNS QLD 4870



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PO Box 960N, NORTH CAIRNS QLD 4870
AUSTRALIA
Phone: 07 4041 4596 Fax: 4041 4597
ABN 31 048 665 207

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First published January 2009

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Miriam-Rose Ungunmerr-Baumann says that:

"a special quality, a unique gift of the Aboriginal people, is inner deep listening and quiet still awareness.

Dadirri recognises the deep spring that is inside us. It is something like what you call contemplation."

Dadirri is a spiritual tendency, common to all the traditional Australian Aboriginal religions.

Where does it fit into the story of Christian spirituality through the centuries?

Dan O'Donovan, a Catholic priest, lives as a hermit on the outskirts of the village of Beagle Bay, a community of around 300 Aboriginal people in the Kimberley, Western Australia.

The Aboriginal people of South India are known as *Adidravida*. 'Adi' means 'original'; 'dravida' means 'descended from the Dravidian race'. These Dravidians were pushed south and impoverished by the Aryan invaders from India's north-west.

The Christ-figure, in silver embossed on copper, is an artifact of theirs. Christ is stretched out on a six-pointed star, as on the Cross, re-uniting in himself heaven and earth.

The photo below is reproduced here by kind courtesy of *Shantivanam* ('Peace Forest').



“The Gentle One who was stretched out,
and by the outstretching of his hands
held the utmost bounds of the inhabitable world.”

(From the Syrian Eucharistic Prayer of the Great Friday of the Crucifixion)

I

Sinai and Basil

Two main spiritual tendencies took shape across the Christian world in the fourth century.

- The monastic community of Saint Catherine on *Mount Sinai* started one;
- *Saint Basil* started the other. So we will call them the 'Sinai' and the 'Basil'.

The **Basil spiritual tendency** leaned more to the *practical side* of prayer-life: the virtues in action.

The **Sinai spiritual tendency**, deeply aware of human weakness in the matter of reaching our spiritual 'goal' (Philippians 3:14), centred in on the *contemplative side*, or prayer of the mindful heart.

Of course, there can be no close union with God that does not have both these sides to it. It is a question here of emphasis.

This was summarised in *Occasional Paper 1*, page 7.

That is the PRACTICAL side of our growing inner life of prayer and loving union with God: removing vices, practising virtues. The awakening of *Dadirri*, like sunrise over the hills, which *Miriam-Rose* has told us about, will work wonders in our progress.

The CONTEMPLATIVE side, on the other hand, is our quiet awareness, also growing, of God living within us as our Friend and Companion. Jesus even speaks of himself as our Bridegroom, making our relationship with him like a sort of marriage. Saint Paul repeats this same teaching:

'... he who joins himself to his wife becomes one body with her. For, as it is written, "The two shall become one flesh". But he who clings to the Lord is one Spirit.' (1 Corinthians 6:17).

The Basil spirituality was more attractive to what we call 'the West' part of the world, (at present, Europe and America). The Sinai became more popular in 'the East', (Greece, Russia and Asia), with its appetite for mystical experience.

The Sinai way and Hesychasm

'We are *liyarn* people', said one *Yawuru* Christian to Father Kevin McKelson in Broome at Christmas 2001. Meaning basically: people of the heart, the feelings and emotions.

While *dadirri* and *liyarn* come from two different languages, and express two slightly different religious experiences, the spiritual tendency they represent is one and the same, and comes closer to the Sinai than to the Basil.

According to *Miriam-Rose Ungunmerr-Baumann* (*Nauiyu*, Northern Territory), who is responsible for passing on the word *dadirri*, from her own *Nangikurrugur* language, *dadirri* refers rather to an inner awareness of divine Spirit-presence, and a listening of the heart to understand and enjoy It – in Nature and in everyone and everything.

Liyarn is more about the feelings, how you are touched, moved, affected by everyone and everything, in a heartfelt way.

In a little book, *Dadirri*, (published by Nelen Yubu Missiological Unit, in 2001), an 'Eastern' Christian spirituality called **Hesychasm** is proposed as a more suitable model for pairing with Aboriginal Christian Aboriginal tradition than other possible pairings. Hesychasm is of the Sinai stock. The word 'hesychasm' itself is from the Greek 'hesychia', and means silence, quiet.

Hesychasm is a journey inward. We go inside, discover our heart and arrive at inner peace there. As Jesus himself advised, 'When you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you' (Matthew, 6:6)

Hesychasm uses the so-called 'Jesus Prayer' to work along with: 'Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, be merciful to me, a sinner.' As you see, it has two parts:

- 1) 'Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God', and
- 2) 'be merciful to me a sinner.'

A shorter form may be used, if you like: 'Jesus, mercy.' Or simply: JE-SUS.

With the first part you breathe in, with the second you breathe out. It is a peaceful exercise, and has good rhythm, soon you find yourself at rest. Then you can just stay like that, without saying anything, but being aware of how close God is to you.

The longer form above, however, contains important teaching, (or, 'theology', as we say): 'Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, be merciful to me a sinner.'

The great mystics in our Christian tradition have seen in the virtue of repentance the doorway to the interior life.

'Repent,' said John the Baptist to the people at the river Jordan, for the Kingdom of heaven is at hand'. (Matthew 3:2). 'Repent and believe in the gospel,' said Jesus. 'The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand.' (Mark 1:15).

The gift of tears is more highly valued in 'the East' than in 'the West'. Tears seem to come more naturally there: tears of sorrow, tears of joy.

Many know of the Reverend Wali Fejo, from when he was Principal of Nungalinga College in Darwin. Wali is a Larrakia elder, and a wise man.

In one inspiring letter in Nungalinga News, (November 2000), 'From the Principal Rev. Wali Fejo: Tears of joy flooding my soul', he writes:

I have noticed over the years at Nungalinga, that many tears are shed, flooding down the faces of people, big and small, young and old.

The news of friend's death, or that of a loved one or family member, is stunning and painful. Tears full of feeling touch our hearts. I am sure that we can all relate to this heart experience, and here at Nungalinga the students and staff learn to share the pain of those who are suffering.

On the other hand, I have noticed over the year's tears of joy (or something else?) at our graduations. Compare that to graduations at other colleges- are there tears? They don't seem to mean as much.

When we see tears shed at our graduations, they touch the depths of our hearts. The students have battled through so much to finish their courses, and there is such a sense of pride and achievement. Our graduations are a time of real rejoicing and celebration.

'You yourselves know, said Saint Paul to the people of Ephesus, how I lived among you all the time from the first day that I set foot in Asia, seeking the Lord with all humility and with tears and with trials.... For three years I did not cease night or day to admonish everyone with ears. And now I commend you to God and to the word of his grace, which is able to build you up and to give you the inheritance...'

'When he had spoken this, he knelt down and prayed with them all. And they all cried and embraced Paul and kissed him, sorrowing most of all because of the word he had spoken, that they should see his face no more, and they brought him to the ship.'(Acts 20:18-38).

Tears have an honoured place in the Church's spiritual tradition. They were seen as a liberating agent, enabling us, in purity of heart, to 'rejoice' (Philippians 4:4), 'to make our prayer with joy' (Philippians 1:4).

Christian tears wash and clean us. That is why, from early times, they were regarded as an on-going baptism, arising out of that first sacramental baptism of the follower of Christ.

So holy a movement is the shedding of tears, that it aroused all the motherly protective instincts of Jesus himself: 'Do you see this woman, Simon? I entered your house, you gave me no water for my feet, but she has wet my feet with her tears and wipes them with her hair....' (Luke 7:44).

And the concluding word in Matthew's version: 'why do you trouble that woman? She has done a beautiful thing to me.... Truly, I say to you, wherever this gospel is preached in the whole world, what she has done will be told in memory of her.' (Matthew, 26:10-13). This woman remains nameless, with the gift of tears, whose only known identification is that she had a bad name around town (Luke 7:37).

In chapters 5,6 and 7 of that same book, *Dadirri*, you will find a simple technique to go with the Jesus Prayer. Both body and soul are involved. That has been Asia's way for as far back as we know.

II

Saint Ephrem, the Syrian

After Pentecost, the Church in Jerusalem, remaining one and undivided, fanned out in three main cultural directions which today we call the Latin, the Greek and the Syrian.

Early Syriac Christianity

“Early Syriac Christianity”, says one writer, “takes on a great interest, since it proves to be the most important witness to an Indigenous Asian Christian tradition which is free from the European cultural and philosophical trappings of the other Christian traditions.”

This tradition is of special interest therefore, too, to Australian Aboriginal Christians as they compose their own Christian Indigenous theologies in the words and imagery that they find most helpful. Syria was of the Semitic language/race, as indeed is the Bible and the Christian religion itself in the person of Jesus of Nazareth and his mother.

To the Semite, body and soul are closely related and can't do without each other. Through the five bodily senses – sight, hearing, smell, taste and touch – our soul is fed and grows. By the grace of *dadirri*, along with our human effort, these external senses become spiritualised, over time, in a wonderful way, never losing their bodily identity however. ‘The word was made flesh and stayed here among us’, John the Eagle reminds us (John 1:14).

Now, up to around the year 400, there is no evidence of any literature coming out of a truly Semitic form of Christianity other than the writings of Ephrem the Syrian and his older contemporary, Afrahat, ‘the Persian sage’ – hence, their importance. We are going to look now at Saint Ephrem.

Ephrem the writer

Ephrem, (306? -373), was Syrian born – most likely of Christian parents – and hence of Semitic language, thought and culture. He felt naturally at home in the Bible. He lived the greater part of his life in Nisibis, (modern Nusaybin on the border between SE Turkey and NE Syria, see map on the last page), where he worked as a deacon and catechist in the local church. The last ten years of his life he spent in Edessa, 300km or so further west, today's Urfa in SE Turkey. He never became a monk or a priest, and was unmarried.

It didn't all begin with him, of course. There had been plenty of Christian action in his home country during the previous few centuries but no writings that we know of. Many of Ephrem's writings have been preserved and are available now in English translation, so it is easy enough for us to catch its flavour.

Needless to say, transposing 4th century ideas and understandings to the Aboriginal Australian context of today involves a challenging shift in perspective that leads us to view Ephrem at the other end of the one Rainbow of theology that Australian Indigenous Christian theologians are considering today. What Australian Indigenous Christian theology is challenged to is nothing less, indeed, than the invention of a new language – their own, for this time.

One Oxford University lecturer in Aramaic and Syrian, Sebastian Brock, has said:

‘St Ephrem is thus a writer who can serve as a link and meeting point between European Christianity on the one hand, and Asian and African Christianity on the other. For those whose Christian tradition is of

European background, Ephrem provides a refreshing balance to an excessively heady way of conducting theological enquiry; while for Asian and African Christians, Ephrem is the one great Church Father and theologian whose poetic writings will be easy to understand, without requiring any prior knowledge of Greek philosophical terminology and tradition.'

(*The Luminous Eye*, Chavara Institute of Indian and Inter-religious Studies, Rome, 1985,p.3).

The two witnesses of Ephrem

Here is a sample. Ephrem opened his Bible and read the words, "In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth. The earth was void and empty..."

Ephrem wrote:

'I read the opening of the book', he reflects, 'and was full of joy, for it's verses and lines spread out their arms to welcome me. The first rushed out and kissed me, and helped me on to the next, and when I reached that line where the story of paradise is written, it lifted me up and transported me from the bosom of the book to the very bosom of paradise'. (Quoted by Brock in, *Studies in Syriac Spirituality*, The Syrian Churches series, vol 13, 1998, page 58. Used hence, as all other quotations with permission).

For Ephrem, Christ has two 'witnesses', **scripture** and the **natural world**.

'The immanence of the holy in this world leads Ephraim to seeing connections between everything. Everything is significant and has the potential of being a pointer to Christ. All that is required is the eye of faith – the luminous eye'. (*Studies in Syriac Spirituality*, page 54). See also Matthew 6:22.

'Ephrem playfully treats Eve and Mary as the left and right eyes of the world', comments Brock:

The world you see, says Ephrem, has two eyes:

Eve was its left, blind, while the right eye, luminous, is Mary.

Through the eye that was darkened the whole world was darkened, and people groped, feeling their way in the night.

But when the world was illuminated by that other eye and the heavenly light that was in it, people became reconciled once again with God....'

For Brock, 'it has been a particularly pleasing experience to discover how Ephrem's un-Greek, and so un-European, approach has a special appeal for African Christians.' (Page 53).

In his book already referred to, *The Luminous Eye*, Brock, who himself belongs to the Syrian Orthodox Church, observes that Ephrem was heir to three main cultural traditions:

1. Ancient Mesopotamia (now Iraq),
2. Judaism, and
3. The Greek world.

A meeting of sources

'These three very different sources find a meeting point in him, to an extent that cannot be paralleled in any other early Christian writer. Once again, Ephrem can be seen to provide a bridge between East and West, between Asia and Europe.' (Page 9).

In the Latin rite of Roman Catholicism, he is counted among the 'Doctors of the Church' (an honorary title). In contemporary Australia, we may find a similar movement in theologising by groups of Indigenous Christians, also connecting scripture and the natural world.

III

Australian Indigenous Theology

Munguddor Bi Buya (MBB) is described in this way:

“... a new initiative of the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Ecumenical Commission (NATSIEC) of the National Council of Churches in Australia”, a “new ecumenical Indigenous theology group”. Each of the three words means ‘light’: *Munguddor* in the Bundjalung Aboriginal language, *Bi* and *Buya* from the two languages of the Torres Strait.

The first meeting of MBB took place between December 11–15 at St Joseph’s Spirituality Centre in Baulkham Hills, Sydney. ... The group (gathered there) was not intended to be strictly representation of either Indigenous Australia (if that were possible) or Christian affiliation, but there was a good balance of cultures and experiences, and intentional links with each of the two main ecumenical Indigenous theological colleges (Nungalinya College in Darwin and Wontulp-Bi-Buya College in Cairns).

This first MBB meeting sought to acknowledge and highlight the considerable efforts previously made to develop Indigenous theology, notable through the work of Indigenous theologians such as Anne Pattel-Grey, Rev. Djiniyini Gondarra, Pastor George Rosendale and the Rainbow Spirit Elders.

The recent publication of the Indigenous theology workbook *Milbi Dabaar* (meaning ‘Good News’ in the Guugu Yimithirr language) is a powerful resource for Indigenous theological development, providing stories and insights to assist teachers, leaders,

pastors and students across Australia. As with the work of other voices and contributions previously mentioned, *Munguddor Bi Buya* and NATSIEC’s deepest wish is for a greater sharing and use of such materials, and for many more to come.

This collection of essays is consequently but one more step in the long journey which Indigenous Australians are making in rediscovering the light which shines through their traditional cultures, which gives strength and purpose in the face of continuing racism and oppression, and which leads on to a brighter world for all ...” (Quoted with permission from NATSIEC publication, *Kerker*, Sydney, 2007. Introduction and Overview by Mr Graeme Mundine and Revd Dr Jonathan Inkpin.)

MBB fills a gap in current Australian Indigenous progressive thinking and proclamation.

The tide has turned and we are in a new situation nationally since the Apology. Aboriginal affairs have been taking much clearer shape during the past decade with the emergence of recognisable and recognised Indigenous political leadership. Much of the rapid development is admirable and offers hope. But the language of religion is muted and scarcely heard. Simply, we *need* the Sacred. That is to say, there is currently a loss in continuity with Australia’s Indigenous past. This is the gap MBB now attempts partly to fill. It is well placed to do so.

The claim, made recently by Professor Pat Dodson, that we have moved into a ‘post-reconciliation period’ in Indigenous affairs, is hard to accept.

What we have moved into is a post-Apology period. Reconciliation is bigger than the human, and has no before and after. It is the mystery-business of life itself, and goes on.

As Christian believers, we have, of course, certain basic non-negotiable beliefs. The early 'creeds' do us the service of encapsulating these. From them, we move on.

In global terms, the centre of gravity is moving fast to 'the East', to Asia. This observable fact must affect Indigenous Christian theology, invited now to do some courageous exploring, particularly in the Asian direction. It will need to proceed, not only thoughtfully, but systematically, comparing its own models¹ with other 'friendly' models, like Saint Ephrem's.

¹ Such as *Rainbow Spirit Theology* (first edition, Harper Collins, 1997, second edition, ATF Press, 2007).

The Rain comes – and Dadirri-Light

As I come to the end of writing this paper,
The rains are falling for another Wet.
Generous showers, drenching the dry ground,
Bringing what was hidden underneath, and asleep, to life.
Sky, Rain, Mother Earth, speak to our soul, each year round.

Rain is like the Holy Spirit of Jesus, his Breath,
Falling upon us, soaking us right through, meeting our many needs,
Quenching out spiritual thirst too, and driving away worries that heap up.

As well as *Rain*, the Holy Spirit of Jesus and of the Father
is creative *Wind*,
and purifying *Fire*.

It is also, of course, Light: *Munguddor, Bi and Buya*,
Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Light of Light of Light.
One in Three, Three in One. Relationship eternal.

Come, then, Rain, fall heavily upon us!
Come Wind and Fire! Burn off the wild grass,
So that new shoots may spring up
And the ground of our soul turn fresh and green again!

Come, *Dadirri-Light*. Ah, yes!
Light of the Gentle One
Reaching everywhere
Saving in your giving.
You, who have been with us always
In deep mystery.

Come soon, our Own –
We long for you. Amen

Note: 'āmēn is a Hebrew word, belonging to the Semitic family of languages. It means 'truly' and is like saying 'yes' to what has gone before. Its Christian use on community prayer, or liturgy, is taken from the Jewish religion. In Revelation 3:14, Jesus himself is called 'the Amen', because he is faithful to his word.

MAP

